

December 23, 2009 - Montgomery, Fairfax Get Funds to Handle Base Relocation Traffic

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Montgomery and Fairfax
counties are due for a \$300 million boost in federal funding to help cope with the downside -- traffic, traffic and more traffic -- of federal base consolidations that will also bring thousands of jobs to the region.

In a deal crafted by U.S. Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) and Rep. James P. Moran Jr. (D-Va.), prodded along by Maryland Sens. Benjamin L. Cardin (D) and Barbara A. Mikulski (D), and pushed through a House-Senate defense appropriations conference committee by Rep. John P. Murtha (D-Pa.) and Sen. Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii), the two counties will divvy up the windfall to help pay for traffic improvements, public transit and expanded pedestrian access.

"I had really been having nightmares trying to figure out how we are going to get through all of this," said Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) at a news conference Tuesday with key Maryland lawmakers, who announced that Montgomery would be getting the unexpected funds

to cope with the traffic onslaught from the expansion of the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda.

Precisely how the money will be allocated is uncertain, however, although it has been promoted by lawmakers as a 50-50 split. The funds were included as a late entry in the defense spending bill signed into law this week by President Obama.

"That is outstanding," said Fairfax County Board of Supervisors Chairman Sharon Bulova (D).

"I hope that the funding means we have money for some highway improvements. That is what we need desperately," she said as she outlined the impact of expansion of Fort Belvoir. Fairfax is hoping to widen Richmond Highway (Route 1) and improve pedestrian access.

Longer-term goals include running a shuttle bus service between Fort Belvoir and the Virginia Railway Express station at Lorton and between Fort Belvoir and the Springfield-Franconia Metro station, and building a rail spur from the Metro station, she said.

"We are going to experience in a relatively short period of time an enormous growth in employment at Fort Belvoir," she said.

In Montgomery, Leggett has said that Bethesda needs at least \$127 million and probably more to ease access to the base and ensure that residents are able to move around. When construction is completed and the Navy hospital is merged with Walter Reed Army Medical Center, the military medical center will need to accommodate an additional 2,500 employees and out-patient visits that are expected to double from 500,000 to 1 million annually.

Leggett's goal is to overhaul intersections at Wisconsin Avenue

and Cedar Lane,
Jones Bridge Road
and Connecticut Avenue,
and Old Georgetown Road
and Cedar Lane,
as well as improve pedestrian and vehicle access to the Medical Center Metro station and enhance bus service.

A possible exit off the Beltway directly onto the Navy base is also under review, as is a high-speed elevator to open up access to the Medical Center Metro station from the east side of Wisconsin Avenue and an underground tunnel that could also carry cars.

In Fairfax, about \$500 million is being sought to help fix traffic problems in the area around Fort Belvoir. The on-base population at Fort Belvoir in Fairfax County is expected to double to more than 47,000 people, in a location that is difficult to reach by bus and rail. The addition of approximately 24,100 workers could add hours of backups on Interstate 95 and Route 1 unless something is done to improve the commute.

"It is a down payment," Moran said. "The total need is about three times this for Northern Virginia, but this will go a long way towards mitigating the problem."

The measure is not likely to meet other needs in Maryland and Virginia; the money is specifically earmarked in the new law for health-related defense spending in the Washington area, which means that the Defense Department is essentially being ordered by Congress to use it to pay for fixes in Bethesda and near Fort Belvoir, where a military hospital also is under construction.

The money will serve as a prod to the Defense Department, which must report back to Congress in 90 days to explain how it wants to spend the funds. In general, the department has been focused on trimming and consolidating bases across the country, and has left it to local governments to deal with the aftermath, which in the Washington region means increased traffic.

Leggett, working with Maryland Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown (D)

and state Transportation Secretary Beverley Swaim-Staley, had come up with a wish list of projects in and around the Medical Center Metro station in Bethesda, which serves the National Institutes of Health, the National Naval Medical Center, the military's medical school around the corner from the Navy base, and thousands of residents who commute south to the District or north to Rockville and beyond.

Similar wish lists are being developed in the communities around Fort Meade and at Aberdeen, which Swaim-Staley said also need millions of dollars to cope with thousands of new commuters as more jobs arrive with military consolidation and expansion. Aberdeen has \$42.6 million allocated but still needs as much as \$100 million. Fort Meade has had \$37.6 million allocated, but could need an additional \$54 million, officials said.

In Bethesda, residents who have been working with local and state officials said they were adopting a wait-and-see attitude, as much will depend on how the money is allocated and who makes the decisions.

"The community pushed for this unprecedented level of cooperation," said Ilaya Rome Hopkins, who represents about 13,000 residents, businesses and schools near the medical center as chair of the Coalition of Military Medical Center Neighbors.

"We need to be at the table when they are making these decisions," she said. "We need to continue to think of solutions designed for the future, not the low-hanging fruit of widening roads without adding bikeways and walkways."